

## AL's Silver Jubilee

FIFTY years in the life of a political party is a long time, long time for its followers to celebrate the continuity of it and for the people at large to have well-formed impressions about it. The Awami League's original strength lay in the fact that from day one of its inception in 1949 it has been a mass-based party given a resounding start by leaders of very high calibre and charisma like Suhrawardy, A K Fazlul Haq and Maulana Bhasani. As a party with mass appeal, Awami League invariably found itself on the forefront of popular movements launched to establish democratic, economic and cultural rights of the people which culminated in the creation of a free Bangladesh in 1971 under the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. All that formed a glorious chapter in the annals of the party.

But subsequently hardly four years would pass by when that party in a major aberration of its own history and going out of grain with its democratic traditions introduced one-party BAKSAL rule. Few years after Bangabandhu's tragic assassination Sheikh Hasina took up the reins of party leadership and revitalised it from the grassroots up in a resurrected multiparty political system. But in 1986 this was to look blemished by the AL's participation in the elections held by General Ershad. This unprincipled political step of the party was, however, lived down when the AL found a common cause with other political alliances, led by the BNP and the left parties, to bring down the autocratic Ershad regime in 1990.

Awami League's role as an opposition party during the BNP rule that followed was highly agitated with frequent harts. In the end, we got a neutral caretaker government, constitutionally, to hold all our general elections in the future.

As a ruling party now, the AL faces some challenges from within which it can only ignore to its own peril. Some criminal elements have crept into its organisational structure posing a threat to eat into its vitals. Feuding and internecine conflicts have been rather routine occurrences in the Jubo League, Sramik League, Krishok League, and above all, Bangladesh Chhatra League. The rot needs to be stemmed.

While felicitating the Awami League on its fiftieth birth anniversary celebrations, we urge it to strengthen itself by intra-party democracy, avoidance of major pitfalls in its legacy, and modernisation to cope with the challenges of the 21st Century.

## Medical Ethics

SURELY, Rubel has done the society a big favour by overcoming his personal bereavement to make public the sordid tale of professional negligence at one of city's private clinics that led to the premature death of his mother, Lutfun Nessa, late last year. The accusations he has made against the management and on-duty medical personnel at the clinic echo the predicament faced by many others from time to time. However, there is every possibility that Rubel's cry for justice won't be enough to get the culprits their due. Let alone adjudication, the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC) has not been able to even frame charges in almost each case of professional negligence brought before it over the last 28 years due to "lack of enough evidence." At the Directorate of Health, there has not been much activism, either.

The grim track-record on regulatory affairs suggests absence of an effective surveillance mechanism for detecting irregularities at the private medicare establishments, decimating the Council's Code of Medical Ethics into ethereal nothing. Even worse, despite glaring violations of the Medical Practice and Private Clinics and Laboratories (Regional) Ordinance, 1982, many clinics are reported to have bribed some corrupt inspectors to obtain certificates and 'clean bill of health' to stay in the business. Inadequately equipped, in terms of personnel and logistics, these clinics often succeed in attracting more patients for their 'reasonable' service charges. As one disgruntled owner of a better-equipped clinic put, "it has become the best business one can think of." It is people like Lutfun Nessa who pay the price.

In a country where public sector healthcare services are in a shambles, private clinics have been the last bastion of hope for medicare-seekers. Unfortunately, Rubel's story suggests that they are in no better condition, either. The Directorate of Health and the BMDC must recognise the grim reality. They must dedicate their efforts to shore up the surveillance mechanism so that not one instance of malpractice or professional negligence goes unaccounted for, be it at a private clinic or government-run hospital or by an individual.

## Digging in Monsoon

WE like all the seasons of Bangladesh. But we like the monsoon best because we can play the 'road-digging game' in the rains much to the discomfort of the tax-paying citizens of this bulging metropolis. We do it every year without fear or favour, because we don't care for comfort of our fellow beings.

Reports, photographs, letters to the editors and editorial comments have been published a thousand times in all newspapers over the years pointing out to the authorities concerned the hazards of such development work during monsoon. But who cares. The same practice is followed every year causing tremendous hardships to the people. A photograph on the front page of this paper on Wednesday vividly depicted the utterly disgusting state of a public thoroughfare in the old part of the city. This particular road was dug for laying cables for digital telephone lines last November but the road has not yet been restored to its normal condition. There are so many similar instances all over the city. It is known that the DCC has to be paid at a prescribed rate for repair before any agency takes up road digging for cable laying, gaspipe laying or sewerage-line laying. This means repair work is the responsibility of the DCC. Will the DCC wake up from its slumber and do some service to the taxpayers? The agencies responsible for such public service like telephone, gas, water etc. should try to finish these works before monsoon every year.

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's long-awaited visit to Bangladesh to inaugurate a direct bus service between Dhaka and Calcutta finally took place this week. The governments of Bangladesh and India were both, agog with happiness on the fruition of the plan that had been contemplated for some time. The people in general were happy at the prospect of travelling directly between these two cities, provided speedy customs clearance and other logistics are ensured. At the same time, they are apprehensive if this facility would not give rise to other complications.

The road and rail connection between India and the then East Pakistan was suspended at the onset of the war between India and Pakistan in Kashmir in 1965. Even after the creation of Bangladesh, despite appreciation of direct and substantial help from India, the routes did not reopen. The advent of the present Awami League government witnessed a policy of making special overtures of friendliness, many say over-friendliness, towards Indian government. The Ganges water sharing treaty in December 1996 is no doubt a product of this policy, which is understood to have included granting of road and railway transit facilities and corridors to India through Bangladesh. Connection of direct bus service between the two major cities of Bangladesh and West Bengal appears to be an adjunct to the plan of action emanating out of this policy. Let us wait and see

how this plan works.

A number of issues were discussed between leaders of the two countries during this visit. These comprised many of those which were of bilateral, regional and international interest. Among significant bilateral matters which pose a real threat to the improvement of relations between the two countries is the trade issue. The astronomical imbalance in trade between the two countries in favour of India constitutes that threat. The harm already caused and is likely to cause to Bangladesh economy due to this frightful imbalance is enormous. It not only represents a very heavy drain on Bangladesh's hard-earned foreign exchange reserves but also spreads its evil tentacles to cover Bangladesh's industrial and other sectors. The uncontrolled inroad of Indian goods into Bangladesh both through legal and illegal routes has caused severe adverse impact on many Bangladesh industries, small and medium-scale industries in particular. In recent times, Indian personnel and service sectors have also been

## PM Vajpayee's Visit to Dhaka

# What Did We Achieve?

**Bangladesh's infant industries are generally no match to Indian industries, which enjoy the benefit of long experience, ingenious technology and vast market enough to beat regional competitors by producing on large scale at a lesser cost. Since national or regional subsidies are not available, the best mode of proceeding in this matter is to lift tariff and non-tariff barriers by India on Bangladeshi goods.**

visible in Bangladesh in a more perceptible manner.

The question of trade imbalance does not have its bearing on the bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India, but it is likely to become a stumbling block on the policy

itive with the rest in the Union. Can we envisage such a plan in order to make our region or sub-region a free trade area? One wonders.

Following official discussions and press conferences thereafter, Bangladesh urged

ing the trade imbalance is to encourage and facilitate entry of more Bangladeshi goods into India and to take effective measures to control or at least curb cross-border smuggling. Bangladesh's infant industries are generally no match to Indian industries, which enjoy the benefit of long experience, ingenious technology and vast market enough to beat regional competitors by producing on large scale at a lesser cost. Since national or regional subsidies are not available, the best mode of proceeding in this matter is to lift tariff and non-tariff barriers by India on Bangladeshi goods. Some concessions made in this respect by India within the framework of SAPTA or South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement covered a few items. But these were inadequate and did not include most of the items Bangladesh could substantially export to India.

India's unsatisfactory trade policy is again supplemented by an equally unsatisfactory investment policy towards Bangladesh. India, if earnest, could encourage resourceful, well-experienced and skilful



## Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

of a free trade area among countries in South Asia to which all are committed in principle. Many have advanced the argument in favour of a free trade zone by citing the example of European Union, which consists of countries also of unequal economic strength. But many tend to overlook the fact that an unbelievably large common fund raised out of contributions of rich members is generously used for making weak industries or sectors of other member nations compet-

the Indian government to take necessary measures towards rectifying this gross imbalance of trade. Unfortunately, Indian Prime Minister and other leaders did not respond positively to this major demand of Bangladesh. Other Indian leaders who had earlier visited Bangladesh, and they were quite a few, also glossed over the issue or made some wishy-washy remarks. Any assurance made by them fell flat on the board of implementation. The realistic way of rectify-

# Reflections on AL's Golden Jubilee

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

**After the fall of the AL in 1975 its numerous followers defended the party on the plea that its three and a half years in power was too short a time to draw a conclusive judgement on the party's power to deliver — that too under unusual circumstances that prevailed in the country soon after the liberation.**

party were disrupted and their organisers assaulted. The cases were fabricated against the AL supporters and they were kept in detention for months and years without any trial. The party had to face these crucibles one after another and passed the litmus test to prove its bonafide as a people's organisation.

By 1953, on the eve of forming a united front against the ruling Muslim League which already panicked, deferred the election due in 1951 and withheld as many as 34 by-elections, the AL had emerged as the most popular party in the province. The victory in 1954 of the United Front of which the AL had been the main constituent was a pointer. The most prominent factor that accounted for the meteoric rise of its popularity was its political

plants of autonomy and solidarity with the aspiration of the people of East Bengal.

But its populist image and the repression it was subjected to went in tandem — both complementing each other. After a decade of intrigues, manipulation and deceptions in Pakistan's politics when the military rule was clamped on the country in 1958 these repression surfaced in the most naked form. From behind the smokescreen of the military's blanket allegation against the whole lot of the country's politicians the military rulers' principal targets were the recalcitrant AL and the defiant Bengalis under its leadership. As expected, the AL was immediately cut to size by the military with the party banned and its leaders barricaded from politics under EBD and jailed for indefinite period.

Displaying rare resilience the AL came even out of this crisis. After a suspended animation of a long time when after the death of Suhrawardy the party was revived by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in January 1964 with its political plants radicalised and its autonomy demand expanded in scope it portended a period of phenomenal popularity for the AL.

The party's six-point programme in 1966 was responded to by the central government with harsher repressive measures. The AL took the challenges in right earnest seldom wavering from its central objectives. Undaunted by adversities Sheikh Mujib, its redoubtable helmsman adroitly steered the course of the party through the murky water of Pakistan's politics.

The party was accorded a thumping victory in 1970 general election and the singular glory of leading the country's liberation war. It was catapulted to an exalted height of honour with the independence of Bangladesh.

It is however an irony that the AL stumbled just when it was the time for the party to deliver. After the country's liberation during its short span of rule the party administratively bungled, politically aberrated and morally fouled in spite of its many splendid works for the reconstruction of war ravaged country. The period witnessed political chaos, breakdown of law and order, growing authoritarianism, famine and food shortage.

The party as well as its poli-

tics and ideology came under controversy for the first time since its birth.

The AL had a glorious past and its image was steeped in the legend of its great leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Even after the fall of the AL in 1975 its numerous followers defended the party on the plea that its three and half years in power was too short a time to draw a conclusive judgement on the party's power to deliver — that too under unusual circumstances that prevailed in the country soon after the liberation. In the meantime the people frustrated by the predatory politics of the country's subsequent rulers had indeed a hard choice to make.

Yet for those who waited for twenty years to see the AL again in power are truly disappointed. During the early fifties the AL grew up as a party of protest and agitations against enormous odds and ever since then it developed a siege mentality for itself. After twenty-one years in political wilderness when it returned to power in 1996, it still retained its rabble rousing gusto and behaved more like a party in opposition. Although there is a different world today to face from that of the fifties or early seventies the AL, on assumption of power, strangely feels the need to turn the people's psychological clock back. The party's chronic problem is its poor adaptation to change and an obstinate refusal to accept the changed reality.

Met of the disappointments however comes from the party's loss of distinctiveness which

Indian entrepreneurs to undertake joint venture projects in Bangladesh and enjoy the various special facilities and a climate vastly congenial for foreign investment made available there from the beginning of the decade. It therefore, devolves upon the government of India to be serious in matters of trade and investment with Bangladesh. These are not merely economic issues, but have substantial political import. It is high time that the government of India took appropriate measures to redress a situation, which, according to many, might be akin to a colonial market.

The spectre of our land being a colonial market of Pakistan only a few decades ago still looms large in the minds of Bangladesh people, and how! They would not like themselves to be relegated into that position again, in one form or another. Mere resumption of a bus service may not usher in a bright permanent relations. India's recent resumption of bus service to Lahore, inaugurated by Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, did not prevent them from creating an explosive political and military situation between their countries shortly thereafter. Inauguration of a similar bus service by Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh at Dhaka can, therefore, herald a better future only after the unresolved issues are settled. The ball is in India's court.

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once made it an attractive alternative. Now with the ideological distance obliterated between the parties the AL no more stands for anything special. Even in governance its performances are equally good or as bad as those of governments run by other political parties. When the previous governments failed to improve the law and order situation and eradicate the curses of terrorism, extortion and violence, people pinned their hope in a future AL government. Now those hopes are smashed with the AL government's failure in bringing about a qualitative change in those regards. The corruption is an established order of the day now.

On foreign policy front the AL is still a suspect in public anteing Bangladesh's share of assuage public anxiety in this regard particularly on the question of a possible granting of transit and port facilities to India. The government position on this and similar issues is opaque at best and the AL seems to be playing a game of hide and seek with the people on these questions. Its Ganges water treaty did break a stalemate in our relation with India but at a price. The previous water agreements had a clause guaranteeing Bangladesh's share of water during January-April dry season. This vital clause is no more there.

Although the AL never lags behind in rhetoric about its performance the AL's present record is bereft of anything spectacular. So it has a penchant to repeatedly look back and take refuge in its rich past. The proclivity may one day dislodge the party from the train of time which is ever changing. For the political development of Bangladesh the AL is however an asset and any serious misfortune befalling the party will be a tragedy for the country.

## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

## Tax, with a new name

Sir, Our Finance Minister is trying to create an "illusion" that there's no new tax in the budget. Well, he can even put Mr David Copperfield at shame at that! His argument is that he is only expanding the scope or widening the net for the previous taxes such as VAT, Supplementary Tax, Income Tax, etc. So, our Finance Minister contends that he can apply these on just about anything and in any manner he pleases but it cannot be called "new tax". These are to be accepted simply because he has not come up with any tax with a new name!

An Anxious Observer  
Chittagong.

## Rape of public roads

Sir, It appears that due to carelessness, inefficiency, inattention and negligence of the relevant authorities, asset and property of crores of taka — the public roads, streets, and footpaths of Dhaka metropolitan city meant for the welfare, necessity, benefit and use of over eight million members of public are being fast turned into unavailing, unproductive, useless and worthless utility civic service for the people.

A handful of unscrupulous persons with the help of some law enforcing agencies are illegally and forcefully occupying and encroaching upon public thoroughfares for their personal gain and profit causing untold difficulties and sufferings to the public.

Most of the roads and streets which are under the jurisdiction of DCC and DMP are chaotic, disorderly, and anarchical. Everywhere there are traffic jams, crowds of hawkers and vendors, storage of merchandise goods and commodities, varieties of workshops, indiscriminate parking of motor vehicles and rickshaws, 'U' turn of buses and piles of garbage are littered all over.

Do the public roads, streets and footpaths of Dhaka guarantee the Article 36 of our Constitution which reads: "Subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the public interest, every citizen shall have the right to move freely throughout Bangladesh?" Would our MPs and of both the

ruling and opposition parties kindly make the correct interpretation, application and effectiveness of this Article?

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## Vote for banana tree

Sir, Last month, I had an opportunity to be present in a seminar organised by the Centre for Micro Studies (CMS). The theme of the seminar was "Criteria for nominating Members of Parliament by Political Parties".

The keynote paper was titled "Vote for banana tree". It made an appeal to the major political parties to nominate the right persons in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

Examples were cited from the elections held during 1946-96 and discussed how the nation had suffered at the hands of the incompetent, disqualified and unscrupulous MPs. These members termed as "banana trees" planted by the political parties in the National Parliament for their own interest and not for the benefits of the voters. According to the speech:

- Godfathers of terrorists, smugglers, black money owners and armed cadres of political parties should not be nominated in the National Parliament.

- The nominee should be a member of a political party for a period of at least five years, should be reputed as honest in his views on steps to be taken, if elected, in order to guide the government towards concrete programmes for national prosperity.

- The civil society should refrain from voting for the above misfits, if nominated by the political parties.

- Non-locals should not be nominated for the seats vacated by the members elected from more than one constituency.

- Women representation in the parliament should be raised so as to cover all the districts and they should be sent to the parliament only through elections and not by selection.

Persons intending to seek nomination should have experience and good performance record of working at lower tier of the local governments at least for one term;

- Thirty per cent of the total persons nominated by a politi-

cal party should be selected from amongst the professionals;

- There should be Divisional Parliament or Regional Autonomy to curb the corruption in the election procedure and to address the problems of the people comprehensively;

- The sovereignty of the parliament should be upheld and its affairs should be conducted by the Speaker with total neutrality and transparency without fear or favour from any quarter;

- Massive programmes for voters education should be undertaken to enable the rural people to choose the right persons as their representatives in the parliament;

- Democracy should be cultivated at the party platform by the leaders so that a democratic culture is established in the country to attract competent, capable and honest people in politics; and

- Small forums consisting of neutral persons and persons having no intention of seeking elections should be formed to impress upon the leaders of the major political parties to nominate the right person for contesting in the parliamentary elections.

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## Genetically-engineered seeds

Sir, The genetically-engineered food-grain seeds processed by man are reported, as per scientists' research into the long-term effects, to be affecting the food-butterfly population, according to a recent news report. What about the generation-effect on human beings?

This is a disturbing news. Man is now tampering with nature trying to improve almost everything, including the capitalist and materialistic soul. The WTO or the newly founded World Trade Organisation appears to be an evil in disguise, in the name of democracy. The fight to appoint its leader is on in a vicious manner — a fight for survival between the North and the South. The West has also to accept change; namely, the fall and rise of civilizations.

The 21st century (a year away) is beset with formidable and fundamental changes the way man will inhabit this earth in the future. Our policy makers have to be alert and adaptable in policy making to alter the good from the evil, and not move away from the way of the supreme creator.

A Husnain  
Dhaka

## OPINION

# Expatriates Overtaxed

S.A. Hussain

It has long been observed that successive governments of Bangladesh have time and again, proudly and also with a sigh of relief, declared in the National Assembly and to the news media, the amount of foreign exchange received from Bangladeshi nationals working abroad. This foreign exchange helps the government to balance the trade gap and also cope with other major financial deficits, th

On 11 June '99, a news item under the heading "Expatriates remit Tk. 6.41 crore in May '99 through post office" appeared in the Dhaka daily. It said: "Non-resident Bangladeshis to pay tax" (through the Bangladesh Missions).

This reminded me of something similar in nature from the Pakistan era. In Karachi, a Pathan friend while talking about politics, praised H.S. Suhrawardy as the most brilliant and the boldest politician in the then Pakistan, holding him in very high esteem. He asked the Pathan friend, "Who are you going to vote for in the forthcoming National Assembly elections?" Instantly and unhesitatingly he replied, "Qayyum Khan." What a mockery of justice! Though he wholeheartedly acknowledged Suhrawardy to be the most competent politician, he would nevertheless vote for Qayyum Khan!

All our governments acted almost in the same manner. They sincerely acknowledged the contributions and sacrifices of the expatriates, but nevertheless denied them any categorical reward.

Heads of governments and their ministers, during their foreign tours, do not fail to visit the expatriates, and enjoy being garlanded by them. But these political leaders render only lip-service when it comes to safeguarding the expatriates' interests, delivering only impressive speeches on the impor-

tance of hard work and pumping more foreign exchange into the country. But without any incentives such as tax breaks and family welfare programmes for expatriates, these rhetorical speeches are not likely to go a long way towards reassuring the expatriates.

Is there any housing project for the safe and decent living of the expatriates' family members or any educational institution to provide quality education to their children left behind in the country? Are there any seats reserved in educational institutions and in hospitals for their children or other family members? Is there any legal coverage for the family members who are left behind, when they are most unethically dragged into litigation by some people out of envy? Are there any banks, exclusively for the expatriate and repatriate community that would not only serve their needs but also facilitate their participation in the country's development process through easy and unhindered expansion of industrial, agricultural and trade co-operatives in the country? Are there any concessions for them in airfare, purchase of government lands, child education or medical care? Are there any special arrangements for them to exercise their voting rights while abroad?

The answer to all these questions is a big NO.

Delegations of the Expatriate Repatriate Welfare Association called on the ministers, prime ministers and presidents of previous governments. Apart from raising their hopes sky high, these politicians did nothing tangible. This association attempted thrice to see the present Prime Minister, but in vain. So far, their requests for a meeting have been treated with indifference by the Prime Minister's office.

Hundreds of writings of the association highlighting the

suggestions for socio-economic advancement, minimising unemployment problems as well as their own problems in this connection, appeared in the newspapers since 1987. Numerous books and booklets written on these subjects were presented to the heads of governments both past and present. Sadly, these efforts proved to be utterly futile as the words fell on deaf ears. Other than appreciating the money they send home, the expatriates have been cruelly ignored all along.

The expatriates are already being taxed and overtaxed in various indirect ways to the detriment of the inflow of foreign exchange into the country. To make matters worse, direct tax has now been imposed on them. Will this benefit the government? Would it rather not make the expatriate community reluctant to send their money home, investing it instead in foreign countries? Or is the situation such that the government couldn't care less in the event of such a reverse trend?

The overwhelming majority of Bangladeshi expatriates, who are in a dilemma — whether to become a permanent resident in a foreign land or to return home for good and invest their foreign earnings in developments works in industry, agriculture etc. — will definitely have a tendency towards permanent settlement abroad, thanks to the ever increasing tax burden.

Under the circumstances, our suggestion to the government is to consider the negative impacts of the direct taxation on expatriates' earnings. The government must abolish it, realising that this is not a pragmatic step to increase revenue as it runs the risk of slashing the foreign exchange and it can be actually counterproductive in the long run.

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